

PORTER. [H.P.]

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THE  
COMMON NERVOUS TROUBLE  
OF  
OLD SOLDIERS.



1888.



### The Common Nervous Trouble of Old Soldiers.

Mr. President, officers and member of the Northern Kansas Medical Society:—

Pardon me for asking you why it is that the ex-soldier's hand trembles? Why is his gait unsteady? Why these failures of memory and will power? Why is he so sensitive to thermal changes or why, I should have said, this permanent unbalancing of the heat regulating mechanism of the soldier's body?

Why is it that he is so often disqualified for making the best possible adjustment or even an average adjustment of his surroundings? Why does he so often fall behind his competitors in the struggle for existence? Why this tendency to mendacity so heartlessly mentioned in a recent issue of a leading daily paper? What is the cause of the aches and pains that he will persist in calling rheumatic. Why that stiffness when attempting to mobilize himself? What has become of his ability to make fine mental and muscular adjustments? Why in short, did the ex-soldiers age young?

This is no fiction of the imagination. You can find evidences of these physical defects in this pre-eminent soldier state on every hand—they are visible to every competent observer and so very common that they have been almost entirely overlooked.

Men think, reason, remember, will and act by reason of their having a nervous system and it is to state a very simple truth when we say that defect of function always follows a defect of nerve structure. The converse is also true that when the nervous system functions defectively, it is evidence of a defect within itself, and when it functions defectively for long periods of time the defect is undoubtedly structural.

The life of our soldiers of the late war was one continuous hardship to the nervous system. It was characterized by continuous discomfort to the body in general and the nervous system in particular.

When the brain of man functions as courage in the presence of great and imminent danger, it does so at a great sacrifice of energy, and there can be no great sacrifice of energy without injury to the physical substructure that has functioned as energy.

Gen. Sheridan was honest enough to say that he was "d—d afraid" in battle; that it was all a question of the power of the mind over the body.

For every one hour of battle, there were hundreds of hours of the brain tension of expected danger.

One of the prominent factors in the deterioration of the soldier's nervous system was loss of his regular sleep in a comfortable bed.

The wear and tear of the soldier's organism was never compensated for (and under the circumstances of



war never could have been) by adequate rest and refreshment.

The nervous system of man is the highest known product of organic evolution in the universe, or to put it in harmony with prevailing belief, it is God's best effort.

In the hemispherical ganglia of the human brain, matter rises to the dignity of thought.

The structure of the nervous system is delicate and complex beyond all other things—it cannot be abused with impunity, although long intervals of time may exist betwixt the infliction of the injury and the after effects that never fail to follow if life is sufficiently prolonged.

These nervous defects did originate in the service of the United States, and in the line of duty, and they are pensionable under the existing laws; but what does the pensioner know about neuro-pathology? He knows that he tires readily when engaged at manual labor that a sound man performs with ease; that his wind (as he expresses it) gives out, and that somehow he is not well; being unversed in medical nomenclature, he is at a loss to give a name to his ailments, and consequently cannot in many cases go to work properly and lay the foundation of a well-deserved pension claim.

My purpose in writing this article is for the ex-soldier's good and his country's honor. It is to call your attention to these disabilities that are

so common, as we have stated above, that we are apt to overlook them.

In presenting this paper, I have no other axe to grind; I did not come here to peddle any wares; I did not write this to advertise any fancied superior wisdom; but I am here to point out a way whereby every one of us can conscientiously help some deserving man before the end of this week, if we will but look around us for the opportunity.

Dr. Stearns, of Lynn, Mass. has suggested the word Neurokinesis to express in brief the common nervous troubles of the ex-soldiers. It would seem that Neurokinesis, meaning a shaking up of the nervous system, should be applied to the cause of these troubles, and that neural atrophy would better express the present condition as we find them in these cases today. I am aware that the words neural atrophy involve a pathological hypothesis, but it is an hypothesis resting on grounds that appear to be impregnable, but for that matter a pension claim can be brought before the pension bureau under the broad heading of nervous disability, which words in these cases do not involve any guessing whatever.

I shall state a truism when I tell you that these nervous defects are the outcome of a permanent and (as a rule with but few, very few exceptions) incurably diseased nervous system. There is a physical basis beneath all of these defects of function.

The subjective face of unnatural

and unhealthful nerve function is always pathological.

One of the rare and extreme forms of these common nervous troubles is a tendency to mendacity, but will we ever forget that menacity is always the outcome of defective cerebral organization, that even bad habits have a substratum of abnormal cerebral neurine that the same neurotic abnormalities that provoke an appetite for stimulants, also hold the will power in abeyance, blunt all of the higher mental faculties and that the best part of mind was the latest to be evolved, the least stable and the first to suffer in any progressive degeneration of the nerve centres that function as mind?

Before leaving this subject I desire to call your attention to the date of origin of these nervous defects of the veterans of the late war. They began when the young soldier left a comfortable home and entered an unhygienic environment, and they are the outcome of the sum total of all of the hardships experienced by the soldier while in the service of the United States and in the line of duty during all of the years, months and days of said service as shown upon the muster rolls containing their war records and which are now on file in the war department of the United States.

Somebody is to blame for the neglect to pension these men for the disabilities hereinabove mentioned—

the fault is not with the pension bureau; it cannot issue pensions for nervous disability until a formal demand for it has been made; the fault is not with the soldier, for he is incompetent to know very much about pathological matters. The fault lies with us and others, who are the medical advisers of these men, because certificates of disability upon which to base a pension claim must necessarily in the majority of cases come from the family physician. Let each and all of us resolve to make amends for past neglect and contribute of our knowledge and diagnostic skill to help these men obtain their just dues.

No country can afford to treat its brave men grudgingly and no generous man would object to the pensioning of these disabilities.

The common nervous troubles of old soldiers are the legitimate *sequelae* of the degradation of nerve structure that had its origin in the Neurokinesis of battle, in the tiresome watches of sleepless nights, in exposures to thermal extremes in the ever varying vicissitudes of climate. They came of malarial saturation; they were born in prison pens, while Infinite Mercy slept. Andersonville was fruitful of causation in this direction—Andersonville, over which God, for some inscrutable reason, spread a pall that was impervious to prayer—they only need to be looked for to be found, and they should be recognized and brought to the attention of the government by us that justice may be done to these brave men who cannot obtain it of themselves.



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There is a form of progressive nervous disease that has its origin in a painful scar of cicatrix that has been insufficiently noticed by medical writers except in what is known as painful stump. A painful cicatrix means a neuritis; and it is the law of neuritis to proceed along the affected nerve centripetally until the spinal cord is involved, and sometimes the mischief extends to the brain and the victim becomes a total wreck.

Pardon me for inviting your attention to the entanglement of nerve fiber in cicatricial tissue—the Gynecologist has appreciated this pathological condition at its true value, but it is capable of giving rise to untold miseries in other localities than the cervix uteri.

A neighbor received a gun shot flesh wound of his right arm that was followed by gangrene that finally healed, leaving a rather large but painful cicatrix, which gave rise to a painful arm, and finally epilepsy supervened. His present condition is that of dementia and a general paralysis—his face wears an idiotic leer. In a few more months the degradation of nerve structure will have reached limits that are incompatible with life,

And now a word about the unhinging of the heat regulating mechanism of the soldier's body. It reminds us of the famous leaning tower of Pisa. A lesser force would

be required to overturn it than a similar tower that stands erect. It is possible for this defect of the so-called heat regulating center of the soldier's nervous system to make all of the difference betwixt a transient nasal catarrh in a previously sound man and a fatal acute lung ailment in the unsound man.

It should never be forgotten that an unhinging of the heat regulating mechanism caused by exposure in the Chickahominy swamps in 1862, may become the prime cause of a soldier's death from pneumonia in the coming winter of 1888-9.

The laws which pension the widow and orphan are ironclad. No commissioner can make the much needed rules that shall pension all regardless of the cause of the husband and the father's death, consequently we, as the family physicians of these veterans, should see to it when a soldier dies of an acute disease that the part played in the fatal drama by diminished vital resistance that was the consequence of his pensionable ailments shall be scientifically determined, the facts properly written out and covered by an affidavit duly signed and sealed according to law, ever "holding evenly balanced the scales of justice between the pensioner and the Pension Bureau without prejudice or partiality to either."

HORACE P. PORTER, M. D., ✓

Late Assistant Surgeon 7th and  
Surgeon 10th Reg. Conn. Vols.

Oneida, Kansas, Nov. 6, 1888.



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